

Reexamining opera, one classic at a time

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Perspective by Anne Midgette

Classical music critic

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Rather than staging old operas over and over, why don't we write new versions? The question is often asked, but I've seldom seen it put into practice. An exception is David Lang's "Prisoner of the State," a retracing of Beethoven's "Fidelio," which had its world premiere at the New York Philharmonic earlier this month.

Yes, the New York Philharmonic — because really innovative new opera, as I've said before, doesn't seem to happen often in actual opera houses. At least, not in American ones.

"Prisoner of the State" is an evocative reimagining in which Beethoven's original lurks just below the surface, visible like a gravestone rubbing that has been worked into a new drawing.

For some years, Lang has been fruitfully mining a distinctive vein of work: vocal-instrumental music that's both lyrical and ascetic, with instruments offsetting graceful, short vocal lines.

One example is "The Little Match Girl Passion," the 2008 choral work that made a Bach-like oratorio out of a Hans Christian Andersen story. It won Lang a Pulitzer Prize, which helped transform him from downtown maverick into a darling of the classical music establishment — a composer, in short, that the New York Philharmonic would commission.

The New York Philharmonic that finished its season with "Prisoner of the State," however, is striving to be a different New York Philharmonic from the elitist ensemble that for many decades had done little to dispel critic-composer Virgil Thomson's statement, in 1940, that the orchestra "is not a part of New York's intellectual life."

The American conductor Alan Gilbert, the orchestra's music director from 2009 to 2017, tried to shake things up with semi-stagings of operas (such as Ligeti's "Le grand macabre") and a new-music festival, but he didn't seem to get enough traction to effect the change he wanted. His successor, Jaap van Zweden, wasn't an obvious choice: The Dutch conductor had improved the Dallas Symphony but wasn't known for great charisma, people skills or particularly innovative programming.

Van Zweden, however, has turned out to be more flexible than the naysayers anticipated. And under him and Deborah Borda, the administrative powerhouse who turned the Los Angeles Philharmonic into one of the most exciting orchestras in the country before

returning to New York as the Philharmonic's president and chief executive in 2017, the orchestra is having something of a renaissance.

Themes of the 2018-2019 season, Van Zweden's first, included immigration and work by such important New York composers as Lang; Julia Wolfe, who wrote the oratorio "Fire in My Mouth" about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire; and John Corigliano.

The 2019-2020 season will include the start of "Project 19," commissions from 19 female composers to mark the centennial of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. And last week, the orchestra sounded very good.

For Lang's piece, the orchestra performed in a cage of chain-link fence, many players sporting the same knit caps as the opera's protagonist, the "Assistant" (Leonore in Beethoven's version), a woman who has disguised herself as a man to find her husband, a political prisoner.

"Fully staged" is a debatable concept in a concert hall, but director Elkhanah Pulitzer and stage designer Matt Saunders created an effective prison behind and around the musicians, separating them from a metal prison door with a central walkway. On a ledge above and behind the stage covered the men's chorus, their yellow prison jumpsuits one of the few touches of color (Maline Casta designed the costumes) in a somber palette.

Lang's music, too, is austere but shot through with vivid color, massing the whole orchestra in dark ferocious outbreaks or thinning it down to singing strings behind the voices. (The amplification was evidently adjusted and improved after opening night.)

The clarity of music was matched by a clarity of language, yielding a piece that was felt as strong and distilled as vodka. Sometimes the text was a near-literal translation of the German: The Prisoner (the baritone Jarett Ott), captive in a pit beneath the stage and transmitting his first aria via video to the back wall like a modern-day hostage film, opened his aria with the words "Uhhh. So dark," approximating the "Gott, welch' Dunkel hier" of Beethoven's tenor Florestan. Sometimes the aria simply evoked the sense of the original, like the Jailer's paean to the power of gold, here no jolly ditty but a statement of bitter pragmatism, powerfully sung by Eric Owens, who seems to be in fine vocal form these days.

Other moments were entirely new, such as the exegesis of the evil Governor, sung raggedly by Alan Okie, that it is "better to be feared than to be loved." The tone was set by the Assistant's opening aria: "I was a woman once," Julie Mathevet sang, exploring the implications of the character's cross-dressing in a delicate voice that took on some of the vibrato-less sexlessness of a boy soprano.

As for the ending, Beethoven's original *deus ex machina* — virtue rewarded, evil punished — was referred to as a relic of a better time, but not something possible in the real world. The Assistant tries to shoot the Governor, but nothing happens; getting rid of a single man will make no difference to the system that enslaves them all.

In the States, big opera projects are often shaped by constraints: limited rehearsal time, the budgets and concepts of the presenting institutions.

In Europe, where the arts are still largely state supported (and where all five of the other co-commissioners for Lang's opera are based), there's a tradition of working with no constraints at all. Pierre Audi, the director who heads the Dutch National Opera, the Holland Festival and, since 2017, the Park Avenue Armory, has just seen his production "Aus Licht," based on Karlheinz Stockhausen's 29-hour cycle of seven distinct operas, performed with forces including 680 musicians and technicians, as well as four helicopters, after two years (not a typo) of rehearsal time.

In comparison to that, "Everything That Happened and Would Happen," by the German - director-composer Heiner Goebbels, which Audi brought to the Armory for a week-long run in June, was small potatoes — all it did was use 11 dancers, five musicians, videos and a wealth of props to try to recount the 20th century in Europe in a little over two hours.

Here's the thing: Constraints aren't necessarily a bad thing. American opera companies, trying to create new work, have come up with a formula involving dramaturges and libretto workshops; the results often seem formulaic.

But Goebbels's wildly ambitious work, drawing liberally on John Cage's two "Europeras" and Patrik Ourednik's marvelously zany book "Europeana," was so unformed that it felt much longer than it was. The dancers filled and emptied the cavernous space with different props and projection surfaces in an allegory of the messes of human history, constantly torn down and made anew.

There were some wonderful moments, such as the sequence when parallel rays of light, filling the vast hall, created the illusion that they were transporting the dancers, a visual conveyor belt. But the welter of image and idea and sound needed an editor. Had it been an hour shorter, it would have been magnificent.

The impulse to reexamine the genre is the right one.

But even the Metropolitan Museum, this spring, seems more pioneering than the Metropolitan Opera: The Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson's installation "Death Is Elsewhere" is as much opera as it is anything else, mingling music and words and visuals and actions in a mesmerizing hour-long video, on seven screens. Two pairs of twins (including

indie singer-composers Bryce and Aaron Dessner) walk in a circle, strumming guitars and singing snippets of text to a repeating, folklike melody, framed by the vividly green Icelandic landscape.

Is there a line between opera and performance art? Kjartansson is breaking it down. His 2011 piece “Bliss,” staged in Los Angeles in May, presents the last two minutes of Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro,” sung over and over for a solid 12 hours.

That’s staging old opera over and over with a vengeance — and emphasizing its humanity, its repetitiveness, its beauty, and the sheer human feat of pulling it off.